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Between the Margins and the Mainstream: The Odyssey of Women in Greek and Yorubá Thoughts

Bosede A. Adebowale¹ & Goke A. Akinboye²

Abstract

Scholars have generally appraised issues relating to women from the viewpoint of gender inequalities and claimed that the female folk are largely oppressed by their male counterparts. Without doubt, the twenty-first century has witnessed gender relations characterized by a lot of imbalances especially to the detriment of women. However, studies have shown that in many societies, women enjoy some undeniable rights, and that prior to slave trade, colonialism and the advent of the missionaries in Africa, Yorubá women of southwest Nigeria enjoyed certain privileges as much as their male counterparts and such as demanded by Plato in his 'ideal state'. This paper investigates the ideal roles and status of women from historical, religious, philosophical and cultural perspectives of the Yorubá people and compares their phenomenon with those of the ancient Athens as projected by Plato. Examining the rights of women from these two socio-cultural milieus, the paper establishes when and how gender inequality became a subject of debate in the histories of the Greek and the Yoruba people.

Key words: Women, Yorubá, Athenian Greek, Gender Inequalities, Plato.

Introduction

Gender discrimination against women, like other similar concepts, is a universal phenomenon that has perpetuated various patriarchal societies, differing from one culture to another. As such, a definite or universal origin of gender prejudice cannot be easily ascertained. For instance, many studies have attributed its origin to myths and religion. Referring to the account of

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the Bible book of Genesis 2: 7-22 and 3:16, Millet (1970:52) argues that religion is one of the tools used to legitimize male dominance because 'patriarchy has God on its side.' According to her, Christian religion portrays the creation of Eve as an after thought; her creation from the rib of Adam made her inferior and subject to the authority of the man. Women do not fare well under Islamic religion either. They are incapacitated economically because they are made to live a secluded lifestyle called *purdah*. The traditional religions are not exceptional since women are also generally regarded as inferior to men. Evidently, most religions and traditions have relegated women to an insignificant position thereby supporting, reinforcing and sustaining gender inequality in many societies.

In another vein, the origin of patriarchy and gender discrimination has been purportedly explained in terms of the biology of human production. Ogege (2011) submits that infant mortality rate was high in the early human history due to malnutrition, devastating diseases and environmental conditions. In order to combat the situation, an 'adaptative mechanism' was taken. The roles of women were limited to child care and household chores. Burdened with the enormity of these household activities, women became dependent on men. Firestone (1972: 29) encapsulates the ordeal of women in this regard:

Women are disadvantaged by their biology: menstruation, childbirth and menopause are all physical burdens for women, but pregnancy and breast feeding have the most serious social consequences... when women are pregnant or nursing babies, they are dependent on males whether husband, lover, brother, etc for physical survival. Women's dependence on men is protracted by the long period during which human infants are dependent on their mothers compared to the infants of other species ... This dependence on men is universal and it produced unequal power relationship.

Thus, women dependency earned men valued, dominant and prestigious role of providing for the survival and expectation of women. However, viewed from this perspective, Ogege (2011:68) concludes that a woman's dependence on man marked the beginning of 'female minority status in society.' Like ancient Greece and, indeed, other societies, Nigeria is characterised with a stratification system that features gender inequality.

Therefore, this paper focuses on the comparative study of the traditional Yoruba women and their Athenian Greek counterparts. Information on the latter is taken from the works of the Greek philosopher, Plato.

Plato on the Status of Women in Ancient Athens

In the fifth century ancient Greece, women had different rights which sometimes depended on the city-state in focus. For instance, Spartan women enjoyed more rights and freedom than the Athenian women. The ancient Athenian society, was patriarchal. In the Athenian law, the woman did not have an independent existence. Her life was incorporated into the *oikos* (household) headed by her *kyrios*, who was her owner or master, or her male guardian. Before her marriage, a woman was under the guardianship of her father or a male next of kin. Upon marriage, her husband took over as her guardian. But if subsequently she was widowed or divorced without a son, her original guardian took over again. On the other hand, if she was widowed and had sons who were minor, she could decide to stay in her husband's house and be under her sons' guardianship. If her sons were of age, she could choose to be under their guardianship. Generally, the guardian of a woman was expected to protect and ensure her economic maintenance and to take responsibility for her overall welfare. She was, indeed, treated like a minor. The Athenian women lived a secluded life without any political right. She was not regarded as a free citizen. Modrak (1978) asserts that full citizenship was restricted to Athenian property-owners who were free adult males. Also, a woman was not given the right to own property.

In the ancient Athenian household, the father and husband reigned supreme; thus, a typical Athenian woman exercised no rights and did not participate in public affairs apart from a few religious festivals or funerals. Women were not allowed to mingle freely with men other than close relatives. A wife was not allowed to join her husband in entertaining guests when her husband had male guests. The Athenian wife was expected to retire to the back of the house and stay out of sight. The groups of women allowed to have unimpeded social relation were priestesses, prostitutes and trades women. Women were not really given the right to vocational opportunities other than kneading flour, knitting wool, etc. However, women of lowest social strata, for economic reasons, could engage in petty trading activities, such as selling vegetables, but were not allowed to own any major business transactions. Working class women among them could be midwives, wet nurses, and chaplet makers.



For the purpose of specificity, recourse is taken in Plato's selected works which relate to women and their status in the state. Plato, although an elite Athenian philosopher, provides certain first-hand information on women and their status in an ideal state. Contemplating on the life of Athenian women, Plato sets out to construct an ideal state that does not discriminate against women. However, due to his dualistic approach to the feminine issues, Plato has been tagged with two paradoxical names: a feminist and an antifeminist. On the one hand, his ideally best society, projected in *The Republic*, ultimately portrays him as a feminist because in the work, he advocates for women to rule as *guardians* in the state. On the other hand, Plato's viewpoint on the position of the great majority of free women, that made up the Republic's industrial and agricultural class (the working class), is unequivocally antifeminism. In the *Timaeus*, Plato makes a distinction between ordinary women and exceptional women; his account of ordinary women can be found in almost all his dialogues. His conception of ordinary women is that of antifeminism. He conceives of ordinary women to be weak and reiterates their inequality to men, who can reincarnate into women in their reincarnation cycle as a form of punishment (*Timaeus*, 90e-91a).

In the *Laws*, Plato's account of ordinary women is an account that discriminates between men and women; it views women as the less important gender especially on the issue relating to inheritance. Plato declares:

Accordingly, the law that we shall enact, as the best in our power touching such matters, will be this: - if a man dies intestate and leaves daughters, that brother who is born of the same father or of the same mother and who is without a lot shall take the daughter and the lot of the deceased; failing a brother, if there be a brother's son, the procedure shall be the same, provided that the parties be of an age suited the one to the other; failing one of these, the same rule shall hold for a sister's son; then, fourthly, for a father's brother; fifthly, for his son; for the son of a father's sister (*Law*, 924e).

From the above, it is an undeniable fact that Plato makes derogative comments on the issues relating to women. But whatever derogatory remarks made by Plato, according to Levin (1996), was not based on their nature or sex. Rather, Plato argues, as seen in the *Republic*, against

relegating women to the background based on their nature or sex and advocates equal educational right for both men and women in the ideal state. He declares that women should be given the same educational and political rights as men, and that women should be allowed to participate in the guardianship of the state.

Plato presents a tri-partite political structure. The first is the artisan class which is the most populous. This class had no part in the governing of the state; they are the working class that produced the goods needed by the entire state. The next is the auxiliary class that served as the protector of the city and administered the programmes of the ruling class. Though the auxiliary was not part of the ruling class, members of this class could however become a guardian since they were closely associated with the guardians. The third group is the guardian class consisting of "mature persons" who had demonstrated outstanding qualities in the most important activities on issues relating to the state (Modrak, 1978). The members of this class were considered the best citizens and they are the ones suitable to rule the state. In book 5 of the *Republic*, Plato argues for equal treatment of women by stressing that men and women be appointed guardians on the basis of their ability and character. He says:

Then there is no pursuit of the administrators of a state that belongs to a woman because she is a woman or to a man because he is a man. But the natural capacities are distributed alike among both creatures, and women naturally share in all pursuits and men in all. (*Republic*, 455d).

Here, Plato, through Socrates, infers that the guardian class should be made up of the best persons possible, regardless of their sex. To further buttress his position, Plato also employs an analogy to argue that when it comes to participation in the governance of the state, the differences in gender between a man and a woman are just like the difference between a bald man and a man with a long hair. He explains:

Wherefore, by the same token, I said, we might ask ourselves whether the natures of a bald and long-haired men are the same, and not, rather, the contrary. And after agreeing that they were opposed, we might, if the bald cobbled, forbid the long-haired to do so, or vice versa... for

any other reasons than that we did not then posit likeness and difference of nature in any and every sense, but were paying heed sorely to the kind of diversity and homogeneity that was pertinent to the pursuits themselves? We meant, for example, that a man and a woman who have a physician's mind have the same nature.... But that a man physician and a man carpenter have different nature? Similarly, then, said I, if it appears that the male and the female sex have distinct qualifications for any arts or pursuits, we shall affirm that they ought to be assigned respectively to each. But if it appears that they differ only in just this respect that the female bears and the male begets, we shall say that no proof has yet been produced that the woman differs from the man for our purposes, we shall continue to think that our guardians and their wives ought to follow the same pursuits (*Republic*, 454c-e).

Though Plato believes that women are generally weaker than men, from the above discussion he raises the concept of meritocracy whereby he expresses confidence in women's ability to serve as guardians of the state as much as men. He argues that, it does not make sense discriminating against certain gender by ignoring their natural abilities. Relating to this concept, Hasan (2012:6) asserts that the "physical difference between men and women appears with no much intrinsic value" to Plato since both men and women "can be equally trained to be whatsoever they are designed to be by nature." The sex difference is not important when it comes to natural ability to do things even though they have different nature.

Hasan (2012:10) however, argues that Plato's argument in favour of women should not be seen as a "systematic Platonic feminism". To Hasan, the fact that women can become guardians, physicians, and carpenters just like men does not in any way mean that women and men are equal. Women in such professions of men must have been prepared by nature to become whatever they became like their male counterparts who were similarly prepared by nature to become guardians, physicians and carpenters. Hassan argues that Plato's submission on equality of sexes shows that he is not only guilty of sexual discrimination but also of nature discrimination. On nature discrimination, Hasan specifically refers to Plato's argument in book 3 of the *Republic* where Plato discusses the classification of people in the ideal state. There, Plato states:

... but all the same, hear the rest of the story. While all of you in the city are brothers, we will say in our tale, yet God in fashioning those of you who are fitted to hold rule mingled gold in their generation, for which reason they are the most precious – but in the helpers silver, and iron and brass in the farmers and other craftsmen. And as you are all akin, though for the most part you will breed after your kinds, it may sometimes happen that a golden father would beget a silver son and that a golden offspring would come from a silver sire and that the rest would in like manner be born of one another. So that the first and chief injunction that the god lays upon the rulers is that of nothing else are they to be other than such careful guardians and so intently observant as of the intermixture of these metals in the soul of their offspring, and if sons are born to them with an infusion of brass or iron they shall by no means give way to pity in their treatment of them, but shall assign to each the status due to his nature and thrust them out among the artisans or the farmers. And again, if from these there is born a son with unexpected gold or silver in his composition, they shall honour such and bid them go up higher, some to the office of the guardian, some to the assistantship, alleging that there is an oracle that the state shall then be overthrown when the man of iron or brass is its guardian. Do you see any way of getting them to believe this tale” (*Republic*, 415a-c).

From Plato's statements above, Hasan (2012:6) links Plato's nature discrimination with sexual discrimination and concludes thus:

Consequentially, we can have in the state, female-guardians and even philosopher-queens, because nothing in the nature of the female herself can prevent her from being a guardian or a philosopher. But this is not the end of the story, because even if a woman can be a guardian and even if nothing in her nature prevents her from that, she can't be described as fully equal to a male guardian or a male ruler and here comes the other kind of discrimination in the “*Republic*”, namely sexual discrimination.



It is instructive here to state that Plato's advocacy for women participation in the guardianship of the state does not necessarily mean that he canvasses for equality between women and men. For instance, in the *Republic* book 5, after his argument that sex should not be the factor for determining who participates in the affairs of the state, Plato asserts that: "The women and the men, then, have the same nature in respect to the guardianship of the state, save in so far as the one is weaker, the other stronger" (*Republic*, 456a).

Plato also refers to women as the weak class that has to be assigned easy task due to their fragile nature. In the account of two women - the ordinary women and the exceptional women - analysed by Plato, women are treated as less important and unequal to men. Thus, perhaps in deference to Plato himself, Annas (1996:12) argues against any interpretation of Platonic concept of women as feminist. Bunchan (1999: 138) in line with Annas' argument notes that Plato's idea of the female participation in the guardian class is not a proof that Plato demands gender equality. Thus, she declares:

Women find their way into the Guardian Class, not because Plato considers that they should have equal opportunities as human beings, but because he acknowledges that some have the capacities which would be needed by Guardians.

To summarise, Plato's argument for women's participation in the affairs of the state does not include all women, for he already classifies women into two groups: the ordinary women and the exceptional women. Thus, the question that comes to mind is: was Plato really concerned about freeing women from the constraints of their traditional roles? If yes, why was the emancipation not extended to all the females in the city as opposed to only the guardian class? The answers to these questions are not far to seek. Plato's suggestion that women should participate in the guardian of the state does not translate to equality between men and women. Also, in the actual sense of it, women were not really liberated, for the Platonic law only shifted women from one form of property to the other; that is, from being the property of father or male next of kin to the property of the guardian class since some of them were to be wives to the male guardians. The above, then, is the submission of Plato and, indeed, an average Athenian on the status of women.

The Yorùbá Traditional Cultural View of Women

Gender issues have generated considerable arguments in the current discourse of African studies. The debate is not whether women are oppressed or not. It is not whether there are gender imbalances in the African traditional cultural setting. Rather it is on the women's political, religious and economic status and rights. Yorùbá culture, like that of Greek, has been described as 'essentially patriarchal'. A patriarchal society is one in which men are viewed as superior to women and thus enjoy more privileges and rights than women (Famulusi, 2012). Ubrurhe (1999: 285) also describes a patriarchal society as one 'characterised by male super-ordination and female subordination'. In other words, in a patriarchal society, women are relegated to the background by men who believe that they are superior to their women counterparts. With this description, and the notion that major decisions are to be taken only by men, it is conspicuous that in many aspects of life - social, political, economic and religious - women have much less to their advantage.

While some scholars have referred to certain aspects of Yorùbá culture and tradition to argue that there were discriminations against women, others have reiterated that the Yorùbá do not place women in a dishonourable position. The latter argue that men and women enjoy equal positioning in African socio-political structure. Focusing on the same Yorùbá culture and tradition, Odeyemi (2013: 4) expounds the status of women among the Yorùbá when he says that 'Yoruba culture does not place women at a lower pedestal to men.' On the contrary, Yorùbá men have a profound sense of protecting and providing for their women. Oyewunmi (1999: 30) asserts that 'until the arrival of the colonialists, in Yoruba land, there were no women or men because in the Yoruba language the categories *'okunrin* or *obinrin* were neither binary nor hierarchical.' In other words, their anatomy 'did not privilege them to any social positions and similarly did not jeopardize their access.'

Yorùbá traditional culture places a woman in various positions - a daughter, a wife, a mother and a priestess. The way a woman is perceived in the society thus depends on the position she occupies. The role of women as mothers and wives among Yorùbá cannot be overemphasised. The importance of women as wives is reflected in this Yorùbá popular saying that *'apónlé kò sí f'óbati kò lólórí'*, (there is no respect for a king without a wife). A verse of *Ọṣetura* in *Ifá* literature also describes the honour of a woman as a wife, declaring that for a matured man to be well recognised in

the society, he must have a woman in his life as a wife. 'Why are women highly valued as wives'? One may ask. Wives are greatly valued not only for the purpose of procreation, but also for economic production and support. Hence the saying: behind every successful man, there is a woman.

In the capacity of a mother, the traditional Yorubá society regarded women as *oriša* (deity) to be cared for and respected. Hence, the saying '*oriša bíyá ósí, oun ló tó ka maa bọ*', (there is no deity as mother, she is worthy of being worshipped). There are many traditional oral poetry and sayings that reflect the honours which the Yorubá give to the motherhood. For instance, one of such poems describes a mother as '*wura*' (gold) and as an inestimable jewel. Even in songs, a mother's value is reflected; one of the songs goes thus:

Iyà lolù gbòwọ mí	Mother is my caretaker
T'ò tójú mí	She cared for me
Ní kékéré,	When I was young
Eyìn rẹ ló fiipon mí	On her back she straddled me
Iyá kú ísẹ mí,	Mother I say thank you
Èmi kí iyá mí kú ísẹ	My mother I say thank you
Pèlú 'teribamọlẹ	With my head in humble bow
Èmi kò lẹ kọ'sẹ fún iyá mí mọ o	I will never disobey my mother
N dà ò, n dà ò, n dà ò.	No! No! No!
	(Our translation).

The above depicts a mother as highly esteemed and regarded; she is a symbol of wealth, class and precious possession. Really, it is believed that a child that disrespects his/her mother can never be successful in life as manifested in the following song:

Ómọ tó mọ'yà rẹ l'ójú o	A child, that disdainfully looks down at the mother,
Osí yóò t'òmọ naa pa	Will die wretchedly,
Iyá tó jìyá pọ lórí rẹ	The mother who suffers a lot on your behalf,
Ómọ tó mọ'yà rẹ l'ójú o	The child, that disdainfully looks down at the mother,
Osí yóò t'òmọ naa pá	Will die in poverty
	(our translation).

One of the debates on the oppression and discrimination against women often points at their exclusion from politics. Historical evidence, however, has shown that women in the traditional Yorubá society translated their economic power to political power. It would be erroneous to assume that women had no power of their own or that the power they wielded was inferior to men's. There are records of Yorubá chieftains as well as founders of kingdoms such as Mòrèmi of Ifè and Èfúnsetán Aníwùrà, the fierce *Iyalóde* of Ibadanland, both who translated their economic power into political hegemony. *Iyalóde* played an important role in traditional Yorubá politics along with other female chieftaincies like: *Iyá Oba* (king's mother), *Aya'ba* (the Queen), *Iyal'ójà* (Women market leader), and *Iyalode* (women leader or prime minister who was also on the king's council).

Moreover, in Yorubá traditional religious belief, some women enjoy and hold important positions in their capacities as priestesses and, sometimes, deities. The priestess is so highly esteemed that certain rituals cannot be performed without her presence since she is regarded as the mediator between the spirit world and the people of her community. For example, in *Ogboni* or *Oṣugbo* cult, the position of *Erelú* is never underestimated; thus, the saying that '*bikò sí Erelú, Oṣugbo kò lè dà'woṣe*' (without the *Erelú*, the *Oṣugbo* cult cannot perform its rituals) (Makinde, 2004). Besides *Erelú*, other priestesses that are well known in Yorubá land include *Iyá Šango*, *Yeye Oṣun*, and *Yeye Oro*. Similarly, there are female deities that are highly revered; these include *Oṣun*, *Oya*, *Yemoja*, *Ayelalá*, and *Olokun* just to mention a few.

Akinjogbin (2002) explains that the political powers exercised by women start from home for the entire management of the home is under the control of the woman. Akinjogbin further stresses that the political order of the pre-colonial era granted great influence to the women in that women under the tutelage of *Iyalóde* (women leader), had the power to force a king out of palace by "appearing stark naked to him". Therefore, in order for the king not to see the nakedness of the women if he was unduly harsh, he would have to leave his palace. The women would then be pacified and issues settled in favour of the women. This brings to mind the proverb, '*ogboju l'okunrin ni, obinrin lo lagbara*' (physical courage belongs to men but women own the real power). With this, it was possible for women to check the excesses of their rulers.

However, some scholars who argue that women have been too relegated



consider many cultural factors as reinforcing, promoting or sustaining gender inequality. The discrimination of women starts from birth for while the birth of a baby boy is welcomed by warm and enthusiastic reception, the delivery of a baby girl is received in a lukewarm manner. Olabode (2009: 136) comments that 'immediately a child is born, the question posed is centred on sex,' hence the question: '*akọ n b'abo?*'- is it a boy or a girl? The health of the new mother is not considered as important as the sex of the child. If the child is a boy, the new mother is showered with praises; on the other hand, if the baby is a girl, the mother is scolded as being lazy, even, the father is not spared as people chastise him for allowing his wife 'to flatten' him.

In Africa, certain proverbs and taboos are considered as cultural vehicles that have fostered gender imbalance in various societies. The Yorubá also use disparaging proverbial phrases to describe women as being inferior to their male counterparts. Customarily, proverbs are highly esteemed words of wisdom with great importance attached to them. They play important roles in Yorubá culture because they can be used to reflect not only the societal established norms and values but also as a means of maintaining and preserving past events in the memory of the community. Generally, Yorubá proverbs take different forms such as corrective, didactic, abusive and eulogistic depending on the situation (Balogun, 2010).

As far as the female gender is concerned, Balogun (2005: 39) in his analysis of Yorubá proverbs, views some of them as a 'major avenue for continued perpetrations of gender discrimination.' Familusi (2012:302) asserts that some of the Yorubá proverbs are used to portray women 'as less important and immoral entity'. Some proverbs regard women as children that can be disciplined whenever they err. One of such proverbs is: *paṣan tí a fi na iyálé, wà l'ájá fún iyáwó* – the whip that was used to beat the first wife is also reserved for the second wife (our translation). Balogun (2010:25-26) explains the implication of this proverb that "the underlying assumption of this proverb is that a woman is regarded as a child, to be disciplined anytime she errs." The salient point raised in Balogun's assertion is the portrayal of women as subordinate with little or no honour. There are other proverbs that portray women as immoral and less important such as: *Iyáwó tí a bá fi ijó fẹ, iranniyóò wò ló* (the wife that is married from a night club, will, from the club, follow another man); *báa fi gbogbo ilé nlá jinkole-kole, kò pé ó má jale díẹ kun; bí a sí fi gbogbo oḍedẹ jiniyáwó agbèrè, kò pé kò má t'ara rẹ f'ale rẹ* (if a mansion is given to a thief, it does not prevent him from stealing a

little more; if a promiscuous wife is given all the house, it does not prevent her from selling herself to a paramour); *enití ó fẹ́ arẹwá fẹ́ iyọnu, eni gbogbo ní í bá wọ̀n ọ̀n tan* (he who marries a beauty marries trouble, everybody is her relation) (Delano, 1976:134). These are but few of the proverbs that portray women as immoral and unpredictable character on the issues relating to marital life.

However, it must be noted that while there are proverbs in Yorubá culture that recognize the existence of dichotomy between a man and a woman, there are some that acknowledge their co-existence and underscore equality in their relationship. One of such proverbs is: *'í bí kò jù í bí, bí a ẹ̀b' ẹ̀ru bẹ́e lá bí ọ̀mọ'* (the process of birth is not different, both free child and slave are born in the same manner).

Yorubá taboo and traditional religious practices also reflect inferiority of women against their male counterparts. The word, taboo, according to Balandier and Magnet (1974), is a prohibition against performing certain acts and the prohibition is motivated by magical or social sanction. The Yorubá word for taboo, *ẹ̀ewọ̀*, means that which is forbidden. Awolalu and Dopamu (1979:211) describe taboos as "things that must be avoided or prohibited actions that all members of the community" must feel compelled to observe for personal happiness and peaceful co-existence. Taboo is a common phenomenon in every society but it is highly codified in African societies. *Ẹ̀ewọ̀* (taboo) is used by the Yoruba to enforce moral rules. However, some of the taboos work against women limiting their rights, thereby enforcing the patriarchal dominance. Thorpe (1972: 119-132) gives a list of taboos that portray the Yorubá as a patriarchal society. Few of the taboos and reasons for their enforcement are shown in the table below:

Taboo Yoruba	Translation	Reason Given	Rationale behind the taboo
Obinrinko gbodo wo aso pkunrinki aja gbo	a woman must not put on a man's clothing while a dog barks	to prevent the woman turning to a man	To instil fear in women so as not to attempt imitating men in terms of clothing, because men prefer to show the women that they are the 'boss' and that women should be humble and submissive.
Obinrinko gbodo suufe	a woman must not whistle	so that *Oro does not sweep the woman away	To prevent a woman acting like a man, and to show that only men are allowed to whistle. *Oro is a traditional cult which women were forbidden from sighting.
Obinrinko gbodo wo Agemo ni iduro	a woman must not watch the display of Agemo while standing	so that *Agemo does not sweep the woman away	Women are expected to kneel down while Agemo display, by so doing, the women show sign of respect since it is a man that is hidden in the Agemo's garment. *Agemo is a traditional masquerade; during its worship only men were allowed to move about.

From the table above, the reasons for these taboos are rather flimsy excuses to subdue women, relegate them to the background and make them feel inferior to their male counterparts.

Similarly, the structure of Yoruba traditional religious practice is chauvinistic and patriarchal, limiting women participation in religious activities 'in order to avoid the wrath of the gods'. For instance, at a certain period of the months, women are considered unclean due to their monthly menstrual flow. At such period, a menstruating woman is not expected to take part in the religious activities. She is considered impure and defiled and, thus, barred from the sacred places or shrines. It is believed that if she does, she will render all the spiritual objects there ineffective. Apart from this, it is believed that women are not spiritually strong enough and lack the ability to keep secret, hence, the popular saying that '*obinrin o ni gogongo*' (women do not possess Adam's apple) suggesting that women cannot be entrusted with confidential matters.

Some religious activities of the Yoruba traditional festivals are exclusively reserved for men. Hence, the saying: *Awo egungun lobinrin le e se, awo gelede lobinrin le e mo, b'obin ri if'jud'oro, oro a gbe lo* (women can only participate in *egungun* cult and can do well in the cult of *gelede*, but if she undermines the cult of *Oro*, she will be consumed). The issue of inheritance

in many traditional African societies is generally detrimental to women as it sometimes portrays them as property that can be inherited among other things. In traditional Yorùbá society, unlike in the modern society, there was nothing like will or testament. After the burial of a deceased, the family members would assemble and the *olóri ebi* (eldest agnate male/head of the family), shares the properties of the deceased. In some cases, women are regarded as property that can be inherited. This is where the concept of '*opo sísu*' was conceived. The concept of *opo sísu* is the practice of 'willing' (giving out) the wife/wives - especially the youngest - of the deceased to the younger brother of the deceased. This concept is reflected in Ola Rotimi's *Our Husband has Gone Mad Again*, where Lejoka Brown marries the wife of his late brother. It must be noted, however, that when the younger brother marries the wife of his late brother, the woman is not viewed as property to be transferred from one owner to another. Rather, the practice is meant to provide security and protection for the woman. The man who marries the widow knows that he has to cater for her and her children. So, oftentimes, the properties of the deceased are handed over to the brother or immediate relative that has been chosen by the widow. It must be noted that the widow is at liberty to choose whether to remarry into the family of her late husband or outside the family. The practice, however, reflects an aspect of gender imbalance which paints the woman as a minor.

In view of the two main lines of argument in support and against the women, the question at this point is: When, in the history of the Yorùbá did the question of gender inequality become an issue of debate? Scholars and historians have variously argued about the extent of colonial influence on Yorùbá indigenous traditions. Relating his comment to gender issues, Odeyemi (2013:18) asserts that 'it can be conclusively said that colonialism culture negatively impacted Yorùbá culture'. He adds that colonialism benefitted women in very minimal ways in terms of some women rights, 'but on the overall, it caused the decline of women's status'. Colonialism negatively influenced Yorùbá political and other related social order.

During the pre-colonial period, the education system was local, informal and gender stereotyped. In other words, the form of education to be received by the individual in traditional Yorùbá society was based on gender. For instance, a girl-child was trained in skills that would prepare her to play the role of a responsible adult womanhood as a daughter, wife and mother. Her male counterpart was trained and socialized into manhood status. Ezeani, as cited by Ezegebe and Akubue (2012:29), explains that the purpose of western

education was to enable men acquire skills that helped to serve in public offices such as clerks, interpreters, teachers, stewards, cooks, catechists and so on, whereas, girls were not considered fit for such jobs. According to Beleuf, as cited by Odeyemi (2013:9), during colonial period, 'it was popularly believed that western educated females become arrogant, immoral and promiscuous'. As a result, only few female children were allowed to receive western education.

The work of the missionaries also contributed greatly in creating gender discrimination and degradation. Oyewunmi (1997:76) argues that the colonialists introduced a kind of gender dichotomy 'which was almost none existent' in traditional Yoruba culture 'prior to the arrival of the missionaries and the colonialists'. The sitting arrangement in various churches showed great discrimination against women. Men sat on one side of the aisle while women and children sat on the other side. This sitting arrangement can be considered as taking 'biology' or 'the visual' as foundation for socialization (Oyewunmi, 2005:108). Oduyoye (1999:9) construes that 'Christianity, as preached in Africa from the western lenses, does little to challenge sexism' rather it 'reinforces the cultural conditioning of compliance and submission and leads to the depersonalization of women'. It was not only Christianity that bred and fostered gender discrimination against women; Islam, too contributed to the gender dichotomy. In Islamic places of worship, men were not expected to mix with women, while men lined in the front rows, the women lined at their back during prayer partly as a sign of submissiveness. Women, who were married to Muslim men, were not allowed to socialize with men nor were female children permitted to have interaction with opposite sex who were not family members regardless of their age.

Between the Margins and Mainstreams: Conclusion

The condition of women in ancient Athens was quite different from that of the Yoruba women before the colonialism. While the Yoruba women were allowed to engage in certain business transactions and could translate their economic power to political hegemony, the Athenian women had no right to do so both under the law and local customs. Arguably, Yoruba traditional culture was a patriarchal society, and this can also be seen in terms of male-domination obtained in ancient Athens. Yoruba patriarchy, however, is connected with nature and expectations. A typical Yoruba man is expected to be brave and to possess the ability to withstand pressures of life. It was this notion that gave birth to the saying: '*akọ'igi kii s oje*' (literally, a male tree does not shed tears). In other words, a man is not expected to cry or show

emotion of any kind in the face of calamity. This attitudinal concept does not diminish the respect and honour given to women who are rather more emotional and temperate by nature. It is evident that traditional Yoruba women, especially during the pre-colonial era, enjoyed much freedom and political right while their Athenian counterparts lived secluded life. The problem of gender imbalances and discrimination, prevalent in the modern day society was never a part of the Yoruba traditional culture as it was with the Athenian culture.

The difference between Platonic and Yoruba traditional society is clear. The Yoruba traditional culture brings out the uniqueness in women in various ways that emphasize their importance in the society as priestesses, mothers, wives, sisters or daughters. From both the philosophical and historical points of view, this paper has shown that gender discussions, which suddenly became a cause for constant debates among scholars, were occasioned by the effects of slavery, colonialism and missionary activities. The impacts of western culture changed the socio-cultural outlook of the Yoruba people as can be seen even today. It is known that prior the arrival of the colonialists and missionaries, there was nothing like gender subordination in the economic, political, religious and social sphere of the Yoruba people; there was nothing like patriarchy. All thoughts focused on relations in terms of family and tribe. However, in the ancient Athenian society, the discriminations and subordination of women were real and rife, though accepted as the norm. We therefore contend that while the man takes the lead in the Yoruba family setting, women play the more important role of maintaining stability in the family with all humility and respect which does not connote inferiority. Rather, the male-female relationship is seen as mutually beneficial and acceptable for as a man is indispensable, so also is a woman.

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